NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6000 JULY 17, 1978
CLAUDIO ESKENAZI

BOLIVIAN ELECTIONS

ANNCR:

BOLIVIA'S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN TWELVE YEARS, HELD LAST WEEK, HAS RUN INTO PROBLEMS STEMMING FROM FRAUD CHARGES. VOA'S CLAUDIO ESKENAZI HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

NARR:

FEW OBSERVERS BELIEVED BOLIVIA'S FIRST ELECTIONS IN OVER A DECADE WOULD BE FREE FROM CONTROVERSY AND CONFLICTING VICTORY CLAIMS. AFTER ALL, THIS LANDLOCKED SOUTH AMERICAN COUNTRY HAS HAD A TURBULENT HISTORY OF MILITARY COUPS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY DURING MOST OF ITS EXISTENCE AS A SOVEREIGN STATE. STILL, THE EXTENT OF THE FRAUD CHARGES BY OPPOSITION LEADERS AND INDEPENDENT OBSERVERS HAS BAFFLED MANY PEOPLE. IT WAS EXPECTED THAT THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION OF GENERAL HUGO BANZER WOULD MAKE GOOD ITS EARLIER PLEDGE TO RESTORE DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. BUT PERHAPS NOT TO THE EXTENT THAT IT WOULD SERVE, ACCORDING TO GENERAL BANZER, "AS AN EXAMPLE TO OTHER SOUTH AMERICAN MILITARY REGIMES".

OVER THE WEEKEND A TEAM OF TEN INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS ISSUED A STINGING REPORT CHARGING WIDESPREAD FRAUD IN BOLIVIA'S ELECTION. THE REPORT SUPPORTS CHARGES BY THE OPPOSITION PARTIES THAT THE ARMED FORCES SOUGHT TO RIG THE ELECTIONS BY ALTERING THE CONTENTS OF BALLOT BOXES AND FALSIFYING VOTER REGISTRATIONS. THE OBSERVERS, FROM WESTERN EUROPE, LATIN AMERICA, AND THE UNITED STATES, WERE INVITED TO LA PAZ BY A BOLIVIAN HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS BACKED BY THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CERTAIN LIBERAL SECTORS.

THE CHARGES WERE READILY DISMISSED BY PRESIDENT BANZER, WHO SAID THE ELECTIONS WERE AN INTERNAL MATTER THAT CONCERNED

BOLIVIANS, IN HIS WORDS, "SOLELY AND EXCLUSIVELY". MISTER BANZER ADDED THAT IT WOULD BE UP TO BOLIVIAN COURTS TO LOOK INTO ANY ALLEGATIONS OF ELECTORAL IRREGULARITIES.

SO FAR THE GOVERNMENT-BACKED PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE GENERAL JUAN PEREDA IS LEADING WITH JUST UNDER FIFTY PERCENT OF THE VOTES COUNTED. BUT HE FACES A RUN-OFF ELECTION IN THE NEW CONGRESS IF HE FAILS TO GET MORE THAN HALF OF THE BALLOTS CAST. UP TO NOW, RETURNS FROM THE CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS INDICATE THAT GENERAL PEREDA'S COALITION OF CENTER-RIGHT PARTIES MAY FALL A FEW SEATS SHORT OF A MAJORITY IN THE 138-SEAT CONGRESS.

IN THE OBSERVERS' REPORT, A REPRESENTATIVE FROM A PRIVATE U.S.-BASED LATIN AMERICAN STUDY GROUP, ROBERT GOLDMAN, SAID MANY OF THE POLLS HE VISITED IN THE DEPARTMENT OF SANTA CRUZ HAD BALLOTS ONLY FOR GENERAL PEREDA. "EVERYTHING LEADS US TO BELIEVE", MISTER GOLDMAN SAID, "THAT THESE ELECTIONS HAVE NOT BEEN CONDUCTED ACCORDING TO DEMOCRATIC RULES AND CONTRADICT THE CALL FOR POLITICAL LIBERTIES MADE BY PRESIDENT CARTER AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES LAST MONTH".

BOLIVIA'S LEFT-WING OPPOSITION ALSO ALLEGED FRAUD AND A CONSPIRACY TO DENY IT VICTORY IN THE ELECTIONS. HERMAN SILES, THE LEFT'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE, SAID THE RESULTS HAD SHOWN HIS CLEAR VICTORY IN THE HEAVILY POPULATED LA PAZ AREA. HE ADDED THAT THE ONLY WAY PEREDA COULD GET A MAJORITY WAS FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO FIX THE VOTE COUNTING.

JS/PY